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Commitment can be instrumental, normative or emotional. Fostering the right kind anchors people to the nation, with no inclination to leave when the going gets tough.

Let's talk about commitment

BY INVITATION

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FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

IN A relationship, we often speak of commitment, such as being committed to our spouse or partner. Commitment is more than just a promise. It involves decision and dedication to do things, in a sustained manner, to benefit the relationship.

Commitment requires putting in resources, such as one's time, money and effort. It also requires striving towards a goal in the face of obstruction. Giving up at the first sign of obstacle would imply a low level of commitment.

We can also be committed in a relationship with a collective entity. So we speak of commitment to an organisation or the country.

Three types of commitment

COMMITMENT is rooted in motivation – it self-directs, energises and perseveres. To understand commitment, we need to understand what motivates the commitment behaviours. Research shows that commitment has multiple motivations, which produce different types of commitment.

Whether it is commitment to a person, an organisation or the country, studies have identified three types of commitment: instrumental, normative and emotional. These correspond to a motivation based on "need to", "ought to" and "want to".

■ Instrumental commitment

This is about continuing in a relationship and investing resources in it because one needs to, as a means to pursue a goal. The decision to commit is based on weighing the costs and benefits.

It considers the gains and losses associated with the commitment behaviours such as continuing to stay in an organisation versus quitting. The considerations are typically economic or financial, such as chances of getting a higher-paying job elsewhere, although they can involve other self-interests such as one's career progression or reputation.

An individual's instrumental commitment is high when he perceives that the gains outweigh the losses, and the commitment increases as the gap increases. Conversely, as gains decrease or losses increase, instrumental commitment is reduced. So, instrumental commitment is a rational motivation that is essentially goal-directed and transactional in nature.

■ Normative commitment

This is about doing things that contribute to the person or entity one is committed to, based on the idea that one ought to. The focus is on one's sense of obligation or duty as a member of the group (organisation or country) to which the commitment is directed.

So a citizen may give his time, money or effort to support a national initiative because he deems it as his obligation or duty as a citizen to do so. The commitment behaviour is typically construed as "the right thing to do". It carries a sense of moral obligation, based on beliefs about the norms of membership.

Normative commitment increases when one identifies himself strongly as a member of the group. People may identify with a group because it has many things one can feel proud of. Or they may identify with a group as they feel the need to reciprocate after benefiting much from it.

So a Singaporean may have a sense of duty to contribute to Singapore because, as a citizen, he is proud of Singapore's economic or social achievements. Or because he feels that a large part of his success was made possible due to Singapore's meritocratic system.

■ Emotional commitment

This is about doing positive things because of an emotional attachment to the person or entity one feels committed to. Emotional commitment is about motivation based on the feeling that one "wants to" do something, regardless of whether or not one needs to or ought to.

When a person is emotionally committed to a team, an organisation or country, he experiences a strong sense of belonging and feels like "part of the family". He may then feel happy, or sad, at things that happen to the entity he is committed to.

Emotional commitment is developed over time, through a variety of positive personal experiences. These experiences mostly involve quality social relationships among fellow members of the group. They also include trust and feelings of being valued and treated fairly and with respect, especially by those in authority.

In both organisational and country settings, employee or citizen emotional commitment becomes more likely when people perceive their leaders as trustworthy and fair. This is because cynicism – which prevents emotional attachment – is less likely to occur. Also, trust and fairness perceptions provide the climate necessary for social interactions to develop into quality relationships.

Commitment, community

WHAT do all these theories about commitment have to do with Singapore, you may ask.

Well, commitment matters because it shapes how people think, feel and behave. Studies have shown that employees with higher commitment – regardless of the type of commitment – tend to perform better on the job and have lower intent to quit.

It has also been consistently shown that employees with high normative or emotional commitment are more likely to engage in pro-social behaviours such as helping co-workers and speaking up for the organisation.

In commitment to country, citizens with high levels of normative or emotional commitment are more likely to support policies that benefit the nation as a whole, even if they mean some personal cost or disadvantage. Their sense of "ought to" or "want to" also make them more likely to volunteer and support the country in times of a health, economic, social or political crisis.

The reverse is true for citizens whose commitment is dominated by the "need to" instrumental commitment. In times of crisis, the cost-benefit calculation not only suggests there is no need to stay to support the country – it implies one needs to leave for greener pastures.

As a society, therefore, Singapore needs to strengthen normative and emotional commitment, so that citizens are rooted to the country.

The different types of commitment may also feature in citizen perceptions of foreigners. Some Singaporeans feel a sense of anger or resentment towards foreigners living here because they believe, rightly or wrongly, that foreigners are committed to Singapore only in an instrumental way and that their relationship with Singapore is one based on calculation of costs and benefits.

Local-foreigner relations may improve when more Singaporeans believe that foreigners could have normative or emotional commitment to Singapore.

Foreigners may volunteer and give back to the Singapore community out of a sense of gratitude and moral obligation for what they and their families have benefited from living and working in Singapore.

And by building social relationships between locals and foreigners through meaningful personal interactions within a mixed community, foreigners are likely to develop personal attachments and positive experiences that contribute to their emotional commitment to Singapore.

While Singaporeans call Singapore their country and home, foreigners working and living here may grow to see Singapore as a good second home or home-away-from-home. This sense of "home-in-community" takes time to develop but is certainly achievable.

One way to build this is to create opportunities for locals and foreigners to interact in the same community where foreigners can contribute because they feel they ought to or want to, not because they need to.

We should not expect Singaporeans and non-citizens living here to have the same level of commitment to Singapore. Indeed, there is no country in the world where citizens and non-citizens living together are expected to have shared commitment to the country.

But it is different when a foreigner takes up citizenship. Then, he can be said to have taken the plunge and he is expected to go beyond an instrumental commitment to embrace a normative commitment, with a sense of moral obligation and duty of what a citizen ought to do.

And hopefully, over time, his emotional commitment will deepen as he further develops positive personal experiences and attachments.

For the nation as a whole – whether local-born Singaporeans, new citizens, permanent residents, or non-resident foreigners living or working here – the key to fostering a more cohesive society is to go beyond instrumental commitment, to strengthen normative and emotional commitment. The approaches may need to be adapted for different groups, but underlying them are some basic principles:

- Focus on both economic and social progress.
- Treat all groups fairly and with respect.
- Be trustworthy and enhance trust perceptions.
- Develop quality interpersonal relationships.
- Build strong communities.

Then, commitment should follow.

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